

CHAPTER 1

Heads back, the bright-clad gathering of riders swung their horses around and watched the hawk's climbing spiral into the clear sky of the warm spring noontide of this year of God's grace 1449. At the marshy edge of the meadow a huntsman loosed three spaniels into the green reeds, the tall rustle and sway betraying their going until half a dozen ducks burst up in a clatter of flailing wings. The hawk stooped from the sky onto the rising ducks and came down with one not a bowshot away along the meadow. Edward and Gerveys cheered, Cristiana laughed, and there were satisfied shouts among the other riders while a servant ran to fetch back the hawk and add the dead bird to the dozen already in the bag.

"You see?" Gerveys said. "Not a lot of choice between yours and mine. Have you ever seen a finer pair?"

Edward willingly granted, "Not this side of my Lord Bouchier's mews."

The friendship between her husband and her brother Gerveys was one of the pleasures of Cristiana's life, but even as she smiled at them both, one of her least pleasures rode up on Edward's other side—his cousin Laurence Helyngton, who said, "You've never seen the duke of Suffolk's best hawks then. He has a peregrine that matches any of the king's."

"He would," said Gerveys, adjusting the hood on the hawk on his fist and not bothering to keep distain from his voice. "Suffolk matches the king in almost everything and out-matches him in the rest."

"Don't start it, you two," Edward said.

Gerveys laughed. Laurence curled his lip and reined his horse away. His father and Edward's had been brothers, with Edward's father the older and therefore inheriting somewhat more of the family lands than did Laurence's. Edward as an only child had in his turn inherited all of his father's properties, but Laurence had two sisters, Milisent and Ankaret, and the dowers given with their marriages had cut his inheritance down still further, leaving him in seemingly constant irk at life. Not that Laurence was left poor. He was far from poor—except in patience—Cristiana thought, while saying, "Don't goad him, Gerveys. Let this be a pleasant day."

Her brother smiled at her. "He's the one making for unpleasant, bringing up Suffolk. I've not brought up my lord of York, have I?"

"Your forbearance has been beyond reproach," Cristiana said, making faint praise of it. But her smile met his, neither of them taking the other seriously. She was too glad to have him with her this while, on leave from the duke of York's household, to much care if he vexed Laurence. She did not like Laurence.

But even while she smiled at Gerveys, her gaze slid to Edward with the worry she had been trying to hide ever since he last came home from court. These past ten years he had served as a gentleman of the royal household, leaving to her, for months at a time, the running of their manor here in Hertfordshire. It meant they saw too little of each other, but Edward's homecomings were all the sweeter for that.

Only this last one, a little over a month ago in mid-March had been not so well. Edward had been far more tired than he should have been from the one day's ride from court and much too pale, even allowing for winter pallor. He had taken to his bed and wanted nothing more to eat than strong beef broth. Cristiana, hovering and tending to him, had been relieved beyond measure when finally he said that was enough of lying about and, well wrapped in his furred robe, had moved to his chair beside the fire and asked for his daughters. When Cristiana brought them, he had taken eight-year-old Jane on his lap while Mary—twelve years old and grown too big for laps—had sat on a low stool, leaning against his knees where he could stroke her hair. Jane had showed him how well she could read now and her embroidery of a bright yellow popinjay perched on a green branch against a red sky, and he had admired Mary's newly won skill at reckoning sums. "So I can help Mother with the household accounts now," she had said proudly.

Edward had leaned over to kiss her and said, "I could not be more proud of my two bright girls. They're worthy of their mother."

He had smiled across the hearth at Cristiana then, and she had smiled back; and that night she and Edward had made slow and most satisfying love, the first time since he had come home; and afterward they had lain in each other's arms and she had known he was going to be well.

But he was not, and lately she had gone more than once to St. Augustine's church in nearby Broxbourne to give a candle and pray before the Virgin's statue for him, as yet to no avail. He was still pale and his appetite still failed; he was losing weight and strength, and today had ridden his older, quieter palfrey to the hawking rather than the gold chestnut gelding he had bought for himself last autumn and was so proud of, giving it to Gerveys instead, saying, "Let your horse have a rest," although Gerveys had come all of two days ago and only from Clare, not far enough to tire any horse.

But if Edward was determined to keep the shadows at bay, then so would she, for today and tomorrow anyway, because this was May Eve and by long Helyngton family tradition, family and friends gathered to the Helyngton family manor of Highmeade to hawk in the river meadows below the green rise of hills along the River Lea and afterward to feast before most of them went home to their own manors' May Eve bonfires. Cristiana's secret hope had been that this year Laurence and his sisters and their families would not come but come they had, husbands and children and all, leaving her to make the best of it. Worse, they would all be staying the night, but at least Edward was enjoying himself, and Mary and Jane seemed happy enough, kept with their six cousins at the river meadows' edge where servants were watching over the tables set out with food and drink for when the hawking ended. Even Laurence, Milisent, and Ankaret were, for them, on good behavior. Ankaret *would* ignore her husband and ride too close to Gerveys and cast dove-eyes at him whenever there was chance, but Gerveys mostly ignored her and Master Petyt either did not notice or did not mind. A wealthy clothier from Waltham Cross, he was older enough that he should have known better than to fall

for a pretty face and well-breasted body and not be over surprised if she led him in the old dance of cuckoldry. Their son looked neither like him nor at all like Ankaret.

On the other hand, Milisent's boy and girl looked very much like their father, Master Colles, and in its way that was a pity, he being blunt faced and fleshy, with hard little eyes. Not that taking after sharp-faced Milisent would have been better. There were no dove-eyes or winning ways about her. She and Laurence were much alike—and much like the hawks they were flying today, come to that—the both of them constantly on the watch for prey, Cristiana had often thought.

She had pitied Laurence's wife, a colorless woman who had grown more colorless as the years went by. After she had provided him with three sons, Laurence had mostly seemed to forget she was there, until a few years ago when a fever had carried her off and she was truly no longer there he was able to forget her entirely. Cristiana had once said something to Gerveys about Laurence's neglect and Gerveys had answered cheerily, "At a guess, I'd say being forgotten by Laurence is better than being remembered by him, wouldn't you?"

There was, as the saying went, no love lost between Laurence and Gerveys. As long ago as Cristiana's wedding, Gerveys had said, "I'd not trust him or Milisent so far as they'd fall if they tripped."

Nor Edward did trust them. "But they're family," he always said. "We won't be rid of them by wishing."

Laurence's hawk was on the rise now. It had barely reached its pitch when the dogs set up a heron from the reeds, and like a plummeting stone, the hawk dropped and brought the heron cleanly down. With triumphant cheers, most of the company set heels to horses and cantered away to admire the kill. The servant bringing back Edward's hawk reached him just then. With that for an excuse, he stayed where he was, and Cristiana and Gerveys stayed with him, and holding up his arm while his hawk sidled and settled on his thick-gloved hand, he said, "This is as fine a lannier as I've ever seen, Gerveys. Thank you yet again. The wonder is you were able to bring them both back in such good form all the way from France." Where Gerveys had lately been about business for the duke of York.

"That was Pers' doing." Gerveys' squire since they were boys in training together. "He said that if I'd tend to myself on the crossing, he'd tend to the hawks. I did and he did and here we are. Though I'm not likely to hear the end of it any time soon, 'Very full of himself for it, is Pers,' " he mockgrumbled, stroking his own hawk, blind in its red-plumed hood but turning its head side to side, alert to what might be happening around it.

Slipping on his own hawk's hood, Edward laughed at him and he joined in and Cristiana's heart rose. Edward's ready laughter surely meant he was more well than she feared and that her greatest worry need be only how soon tomorrow Laurence, Milisent, and Ankaret would go away.

Only too briefly was she quit of her fear. Toward the afternoon's end, with the feast done but only a few guests yet departed, all the rest were still standing about in talk in Highmeade's great hall—a dozen and more friends and neighbors besides the Helyngton cousins, with half a score of children busy among them and servants passing out wine and small cakes to stave off whatever hunger pangs might still be possible. Because Cristiana would not be able to avoid Laurence, Milisent, Ankaret, and their families later, she was avoiding them now, moving among her other guests— asking after Beth Say's little daughter who had been ailing lately; discussing this year's probable wool prices with Master Tendale; promising Mistress Norbury word when they would sell some of their timber; laying a quieting hand on Mary's shoulder when things began to be too loud among the children. She saw several of the young unmarried women had gathered to Gerveys—a thing not unexpected, he being young and unmarried and comely. To judge by his smiling talk he did not mind in the least, but his luck in avoiding Ankaret had run out. She was there, too, standing too close to him, plainly determined that he notice her, despite how he was plainly refusing to see her.

He could rescue himself if need be, Cristiana supposed. In more need of help was Beth Say's husband John, cornered near the dais by Laurence and Milisent. When John had come into the king's household as a yeoman a few years ago, Edward had befriended him. It had turned into a mutual liking, but with more ambition to rise than Edward had, John was since then become an esquire of the king's chamber, now held various royal offices, and in the present session of Parliament been chosen Speaker of the Commons. It made his friendship a valuable thing to have, which was surely where Laurence and Milisent's interest lay, but his friendship with Edward remained as it had been, and last year when John had acquired the nearby manor of Baas, Cristiana had found in his wife Beth a good friend for herself.

The only thing about John that somewhat ill-eased Cristiana was that his rapid rise in royal favor was much because of the duke of Suffolk. There was too much being said—and said not only by people like Gerveys who served Suffolk's rival the duke of York—against Suffolk and how he used, or misused, his place of power close to the king. Even Edward, usually silent on such matters, had begun to speak against him.

That did not mean John should be left to Laurence, though, and Cristiana looked around for Edward to rescue him. He was in talk with old Sir Andrew from Hoddesdon at the hall's far end, near the door to the parlor, and she threaded her way toward them with smiles and brief words among her guests, pausing to share Master Foxton's hope for a fine summer and rapping Laurence's middle son James on the head with her knuckles to make him let go of the long plait of a little girl who looked about to cry. "Trouble someone your own size," she told him, with the silent hope he'd try it with Mary. When his older brother Clement would not leave off poking her in the arm on the Helyngtons' last visit, she had stomped on his foot. Mary's boldness sometimes worried Cristiana, but sometimes boldness was needed and certainly against the Helyngton cousins.

She joined Edward and Sir Andrew as Edward was saying something about how Suffolk continued to encourage the queen in her grand spending of wealth King Henry no longer had.

"And Suffolk is among the reasons he no longer has it," Sir Andrew grumbled.

If Suffolk sank into the sea tomorrow and never rose again, Cristiana would not mind, she was so weary of hearing about him; and she instantly forgot him at sight of Edward's face. Whatever strength he had called on today was gone. He was frighteningly gray around his eyes and mouth, and Cristiana interrupted his talk with, "Edward, you must rest."

Sir Andrew immediately said, "I was thinking that myself. You don't look well, man."

With effort, Edward made a smile. "When everyone is gone, I'll—"

"Now would be better than then," Sir Andrew said. "I'll see you into the parlor to sit while your good lady sees to your guests."

Cristiana would rather have seen to Edward herself, but he said, "That might be best," with such sudden weakness that she did

not argue but thanked Sir Andrew and returned to see what needed doing. John Say had rescued himself from Laurence and Milisent. He and Beth and others were readying to leave, and Cristiana went, smiling, to make Edward's apologies, saying to everyone what she wanted to believe—that he had come home somewhat ill this last time, was much better. "Just not so much better as he tries to believe he is," she smiled, making light of it until even Sir Andrew had gone and only family was left. On them she turned her back and went to Edward in the parlor.

It was a southward-facing room and the one most used by her and Edward and the girls together. The walls were plastered a warm red. The square table in the middle was covered by a Bruges-woven cloth patterned in intertwining yellows and blues and greens, her gift from Edward when Mary was born. There was Edward's tall-backed chair and a plain chair for her and short stools for the girls; and a long bench under the window with embroidered cushions where she usually sat with the girls to work at their sewing; and another chest along one wall where various things were kept, from the household's few books to various accounts and records to the gameboard and pieces for merels. Edward was seated at the window, leaning against the sill, gazing out toward the fresh green of the rye and barley fields in the light gathering gold toward sunset. Without turning his head, he said quietly, "The harvest looks to be good this year."

Sitting at the bench's other end, Cristiana agreed, "It does," looking not out but at him.

With the evening light giving his face warm color, he looked himself, her well-beloved husband, and she let herself believe that in a moment he would turn his head and smile at her and they would talk about how well the day had gone and enjoy each other's company for the little while until time to gather up the girls and deal with Laurence and the others and go out to the bonfire piled and waiting in the pasture for darkness to come.

Then Edward turned to look at her, and Cristiana knew that for him there would be no going out to the bonfire tonight and on the beginning of anguish, she said, "Edward ..."

He put out a hand, stopping her. She took his hand in both of hers and they looked at each other long and deeply and in silence before she said, "I love you," so quietly it hardly stirred the stillness between them.

As quietly back, Edward said, "You are my heart."

There was no need for more. Still holding each other's hands, they sat in silence, for the little while until a faint knock at the room's door was followed by Gerveys putting in his head to ask, "May I come in?"

Without loosing Cristiana's hand, Edward said, "Of course. No one could be more welcome."

"It was either Laurence or I," Gerveys said. He shut the door behind himself. "I thought I would be better."

"By miles and miles," Edward said. "I'll have to see him, though. I told him we'd talk before the bonfire."

"Talk?" Cristiana asked quickly. "About what?"

"He didn't say." Edward let go of her hand, laced his fingers behind his neck, and leaned his head back into them, easing some weary ache.

"It need not be now," Cristiana protested.

"If I talk with him now, I won't have to talk with him later."

"Then I'm going to be here," said Cristiana, ready to argue over it if need be.

But Edward said, "That might be best."

"And Gerveys, too," Cristiana pressed.

Edward considered that a moment before asking, "If you would?" of Gerveys who answered, "If you want me to, then gladly."

Edward pulled himself around to face the room, drew himself up straight, and said, "Let's be done with it, then." Cristiana rose and moved aside to her chair as Gerveys opened the door and called in Laurence, who frowned with displeasure when Gerveys closed the door behind him without first going out of it. By his look he was displeased to have Cristiana there, too, but said nothing about it, only took his stand in front of Edward and said with the firmness of a man sure of his ground, "Well, Edward, it's time we talked, don't you think?"

From where she now sat, Cristiana could guess why Edward had chosen to stay with his back to the window: with the light behind him, his face was shadowed, less easy to read than Laurence's. Not that Laurence was ever difficult to read; just now he looked and sounded ready to argue something he was sure of winning.

"Talk about what, Laurence?" Edward asked in a level voice.

"You. What's going to happen. Your daughters." Cristiana tensed at mention of Mary and Jane. Come to stand beside her, Gerveys laid a hand lightly on her shoulder in unspoken reassurance while Edward said evenly, "I don't see any need to talk about anything between us."

"Oh, come, Ned. You're not a well man. Everyone can see it. It's time to talk about what happens if you die."

Except he meant "when", not "if", and Cristiana wanted him dead instead—there and then, for preference. But Edward only said, still evenly, "What happens when I die doesn't concern you, Laurence. My will is made. Everything and everyone is seen to. Let you content yourself with your own business."

"What happens to our family's lands *is* my business."

"*Your* lands are your business. *My* lands are not."

"They *are*. It's bad enough the Helyngton lands were divided once, between your father and mine. Dividing them again between your two girls will only diminish them the more. We—"

"My lands are no concern of yours."

"They *are*. Look at the way the world is going. The little man hasn't a chance. It's all big fish in the world today. Little fish are no more than a meal to them. Even you can surely see it's better to be a big fish than someone else's meal."

With less patience than he usually had for his cousin, Edward said, "Laurence, come what may, you'll never be a big fish."

Cristiana felt Gerveys' small twitch of contained laughter but she did not see the jest, nor did Laurence, who insisted, "With your lands added to mine—"

"Which they will not be. I have two heirs."

Laurence dragged Edward's tall-backed chair around and closer to Edward, sat down impatiently, and said, "That's the point. As it stands, your lands and all will be split between them. What I'm trying to make you see is that they don't have to be. Put Jane

into a nunnery with the least dowry they'll take, and let something else go with Mary to whomever she marries."

"Meaning one of your sons," Edward said.

"Meaning Clement. Yes," Laurence said, triumphant that Edward understood.

Only Gerveys' hand heavy on her shoulder and her trust in Edward kept Cristiana quiet at thought of bright and laughing Jane put into a nunnery and Mary given to Clement, that Laurence-faced loud.

"No," said Edward.

Ignoring or not hearing the flat refusal in that, Laurence said, "If you think Mary would be better for the nunnery, well enough. It will be a few years longer before Jane is ready to bear but—"

"No," Edward said again. "Give over, Laurence. If nothing else, they're cousins."

"A dispensation will take care of that. I'll see to it. I'll even pay for it."

"Neither Mary nor Jane are going to marry Clement or any other of your sons, Laurence. Let it go."

"Don't be a fool, Ned," Laurence snapped. "You're going to die soon. What's going to happen then, do you think?" Cristiana jammed a fist against her mouth to stop her outcry. Edward without wavering said, "What happens is that Cristiana will have keeping of our daughters. That's settled in my will."

Laurence's face darkened with displeasure. "Your will," he scoffed. "You ..."

Before he could say more, Edward added, "Moreover, I've made Sir Gerveys overseer of my will."

"And I have my lord Richard, duke of York, to back me in it, if it comes to trouble," Gerveys said.

Laurence sent him a poisonous look. "Within these two months your duke of York will finally be gone to Ireland with bag, baggage, wife, and all his whelps, well out of everyone's way. Not that his lordship is worth all that much these days anyway, he's so far out of favor with the king."

"Meaning with Suffolk," Gerveys returned. "Whose power can't last forever."

"Meaning your York will not be coming back any time soon," Laurence snapped and turned back to Edward.

Gerveys' fingers tightened into Cristiana's shoulder but he made no answer. Laurence had only said what everyone, including York, well knew—that he had been given Ireland to govern for the sake of having him out of England and because he could not be sent back to France. He had governed too well there, in sorry comparison with the present mess Suffolk and his ally the duke of Somerset were making of it.

Besides that, York was too royal-blooded, was arguably heir to the crown until such time as King Henry had a son and meanwhile openly no friend to Suffolk and the other court favorites around the king.

None of which mattered here and now as Edward said, before Laurence could go on, "Laurence, you don't need this marriage. You're well off and comfortable. Forget—"

"I'm talking more than only comfortable! I'm talking about making us strong enough to matter in things!"

With laughter under his words, Edward said, "Somehow that doesn't much interest me at present."

"It's never much interested you," Laurence complained. "But it does me. With the Helyngton lands joined again—"

"No," Edward said flatly.

Laurence started to answer that.

Edward cut him off with, "I'm not selling my daughters' lives for the sake of your ambition, Laurence. You're not likely to be anything more than one of the little men around the duke of Suffolk. With my lands or without them. And as it happens," Edward's voice hardened, "it's going to be without them."

Laurence stood up. "If you're depending on Cristiana or Sir Gerveys, you're a fool. She's a woman and he's away to Ireland with York, who's worth nothing to anyone anymore."

"I doubt you're wise to discount my lord of York, Laurence," Edward said.

"York is finished. Don't threaten me with York."

"That wasn't a threat, only something that 'little fish' like ourselves would do well to remember."

Laurence made a disgusted sound and started for the door, but as he reached it, he swung around, pointed at Edward, and said angrily. "You're dying. When you're dead, I'll still be here. Just you think on that."

Gerveys took an angry step toward him, but Laurence wrenched open the door and went out, slamming it behind him. Cristiana, more quickly than her tears could come, rose from her chair and went to Edward, sat beside him and put her arms around him. He wrapped his around her, too, and they held tightly to each other, Cristiana not knowing whether the tears on her cheek pressed to his were all her own or not.

Only when Gerveys made quietly to leave them, Edward drew back from Cristiana without letting go of her and said, "Stay, please. There's something I must tell you both." Gerveys's answer was forestalled by an eager knocking at the door and Mary calling, "It's time to go for the bonfire!" Cristiana straightened farther out of Edward's arms, wiping her face dry as Gerveys went to open the door. Smiling, he said to his niece, "The bonfire? Surely you don't want to go to that old thing, do you?"

Mary seized his arm and tugged. "Yes, I do, and so does Jane. It's time."

From the shadows stretched long outside the window, the sun must be sunk well toward sunset. Everywhere around the manor all the hearth and kitchen fires would be out by now and folk be gathering to the high-piled wood waiting unlighted in the pasture beyond the orchard. From all the other years, Cristiana knew there would be merriment there now, talk and laughter, but a hush would come as the darkness deepened until everyone was waiting, silent, while this year's chosen man set to work with flint and steel to make the year's new fire out of nothing, silence and darkness deepening around him until the struck sparks finally caught in the waiting tinder. The flames would creep then along twigs, growing until it leaped into the larger branches and burst crackling among the piled logs. Then there would be cheering, followed by dancing and drinking well into the night.

Everywhere it would be the same, in manors, villages, and towns: the breathless wait in the darkness, as if this year maybe the needfire would not happen and all the cold hearths and kitchen fires stay unlighted. That the fire always came never changed that almost fearful waiting. Without that brief fear, the triumph and merriment afterwards would have been less, and Cristiana, like Mary, had never willingly missed a May

Eve bonfire. But this year Edward would not go to it. And next year he . . .

She shivered the thought away before it had fully formed. "Mary, come here," Edward said, beckoning.

Reluctantly she gave up her hold on her uncle and crossed the parlor. "It's time," she pleaded.

Edward put an arm around her waist and drew her to his other side from Cristiana. "I know," he said gently. "But I fear I'm not feeling well enough to go."

Mary burrowed her head against his shoulder. "We thought you were feeling better, Jane and I."

"I am, but I still tire too easily." He lifted her head by her chin and kissed the tip of her nose. "I'd hoped to hold together until after the bonfire, but I have to rest instead. Even worse, I need to talk with your mother and Uncle Gerveys a while longer. They'll come later but it will have to be Ivetta who takes you and Jane."

"Ivetta?" Mary protested. Ivetta had been both girls' nurse since they were small and lately Mary had begun a revolt against having a nurse at all. "Oh, please, not Ivetta."

"What about Pers?" Gerveys asked, offering his squire. "How if Pers takes you and Jane, with Ivetta merely along?" He lowered his voice to conspiracy level. "She and Pers like each other, you know."

Mary's dismay sparkled into delight. "I know! If he comes, she won't heed us much at all!"

"Off you go then." Gerveys opened the door for her as she gave her parents each quick kisses. "And no pushing anybody into the fire. Including your cousins," he added as she went happily to kiss him, too. When she was gone and the door shut, Gerveys looked to Edward and Cristiana. "Well enough?"

"Very well," said Edward. "Now come sit here."

He pointed to the chair Laurence had left. Cristiana wanted to tell him that he should go to bed, not talk more, but contented herself with taking one of his hands to hold in her lap while Gerveys came to sit. He looked ready to protest, too, except Edward forestalled him with, "Don't say it. I know. But I need to tell you and Cristiana something, not leave it any longer." He smiled at them both, squeezed Cristiana's hand, and said to Gerveys, "Laurence is, alas, right about things on the whole. Suffolk is riding with a high hand these days and there's nearly no one left to stand out against him. I wish from the heart that York wasn't going to Ireland just now, or else that you weren't going with him."

"So do I," said Gerveys.

"But since you are, I mean to change my will. At present, Cristiana and Sir Andrew are my executors, with you as overseer. I'm going to change that, make you an executor with Cristiana, with John Say as overseer in your stead. How does that seem to you?"

Gerveys was slow to answer, but finally said, "I can see the point of not having me as overseer, but why Say? I like him in himself well enough, but he's Suffolk's man much deeper than Laurence is." Which was a way of saying Gerveys did not trust him.

"He's not Suffolk's man in the way you mean it. Suffolk has made thorough use of his abilities, and if it comes to trouble with Laurence, he'll have Suffolk's backing far more than Laurence ever could. But John is first and foremost the king's man and therein is the difference. You see?"

Cristiana did not. Since Suffolk controlled everything around the king, didn't being the king's man come to the same as being Suffolk's? But after a moment Gerveys said, "Good enough. I'll trust your judgment of him."

Satisfied, Edward shut his eyes and, still holding tightly to Cristiana's hand, leaned his head back against the window frame, looking ready now to be helped to bed. But after a moment he said, not much above a whisper, "There's something more," and opened his eyes. He looked at her and then at Gerveys. "I have something that, certain as Hell, will ruin Suffolk if ever it's made known."

Gerveys had sat forward to hear him better but now jerked upright, drawing in a harsh breath before asking, even more harshly, "Ruin him? How?"

"It's a letter," Edward said softly. "A rough copy of a letter. Not the final, fair copy but plain enough in its meaning. Written by Suffolk and others. To the duke of Somerset in France."

Gerveys leaned forward again, matching Edward's low voice. "What does it say?"

Edward moved his head heavily from side to side, refusing answer. "Unless you have to use it, better you don't know. It's too dangerous."

"If it's against Suffolk, I can give it to York. He'll use it." Edward pulled himself straight and reached out with his free hand to grip Gerveys' arm. "Believe me, this is something even York won't want to use. Not unless he's looking for war here in England."

"God's great mercy, Edward." Gerveys sounded half disbelieving, half-appalled. "How did you come by this . . . this letter?"

"The king had mislaid an embroidered and pearled glove. I was looking for it, was in the privy council chamber, thinking he might have been there earlier that day. Suffolk and some others had been, anyway, and no one had been yet to clear things away. This was lying on top of a scatter of other papers and some of the words caught my eye. It's crossed over and rewritten. Probably everyone who had a hand in it thought someone else among them had destroyed it once a fair copy was made from it. I read it. Then I took it."

"When was this?" Gerveys asked.

"Late this February last past."

Gerveys held silent, calculating something, Cristiana thought. Then his eyes widened. "Edward. Is this thing . . . you're not saying it's about Brittany? About Surienne and

Fougeres?"

That meant only a little to Cristiana. She knew there was lately some new outbreak of the war in France, but the war in France had been going on her whole life. The only time it had mattered to her was when Gerveys had been with the duke of York's household in Normandy, so what he said now meant nothing to her; but Edward answered sharply, "Better you don't wonder about it, Gerveys. At all. Better you forget the thing altogether unless there's need of it."

"Need of it for what?" Gerveys demanded.

"Once I'm dead, I don't trust Laurence to leave matters alone. He and Milisent. Thieves aren't thicker than those two. She'll be neck deep in whatever he gets up to, and so will that husband of hers. The three of them are all bent the same way—all ambition and not much sense."

"You don't think John Say in their way will be enough?" Gerveys asked.